

Confucius

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Born: August 27, 551 BC in Tuo, China

Died: November 21, 479 BC in Qufu, China

Other Names: K'ung Ch'iu; K'ung Fu-tzu; K'ung-fu-tzu; Kongfuzi

Nationality: Chinese

Occupation: Philosopher

The Chinese teacher and philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC) was the founder of the humanistic school of philosophy known as the Ju or Confucianism, which taught the concepts of benevolence, ritual, and propriety.

In the 6th century B.C. China had begun to disintegrate into a loose confederation of city-states. The nominal ruler of China was the King of Chou, who occupied the imperial capital at Loyang in northcentral China. The Chou had been the supreme rulers of the entire Chinese Empire 500 years earlier, but now they were simply a pawn of the competing Chinese states. This period is generally depicted as a time of great moral decline, when principles and integrity meant little to the official classes.

Confucius, an obscure school teacher, found this situation horrifying, and he attempted to seek a remedy by reviving the great moral teachings of the sages of the past. That he failed is unimportant, for his teachings had a profound influence on later Chinese thought and formed the basis for the dominant Chinese ideology, known as Confucianism.

Traditions and Sources on His Life

Confucius is the Latinized name of K'ung Fu-tzu (Great Master K'ung). His original name was K'ung Ch'iu; he is also known by the style name of K'ung Chung-ni. After he died, a large number of myths and legends grew up around his name, making difficult an accurate description of the historical Confucius. Traditionally, Confucius was venerated as a Chinese saint, and for a long time a critical, objective appraisal of his life was impossible. In more recent times both Chinese and Western scholars have ventured to discard some of the legends and myths and to reconstruct a biography from more reliable sources. As a result, a variety of new images of Confucius have emerged, many of them contradicting each other, and the demythologized picture of Confucius is as confusing as the traditional, mythical one.

The most detailed traditional account of Confucius' life is contained in the *Records of the Historian* (*Shih chi*) by Ssu-ma Ch'ien, who lived 145-86 B.C. Many modern scholars have dismissed this biography as a fictionalized, romanticized legend by a Confucian apologist. Nevertheless, in spite of obvious anachronisms, when used with the *Analects* (*Lun yü*), which purports to record actual conversations between Confucius and his disciples, one can reconstruct a satisfactory outline of the philosopher's family background, his career, and the role he played in 6th-century society.

According to the *Records of the Historian*, Confucius was a descendant of a branch of the royal house of Shang, the dynasty that ruled China prior to the Chou. His family, the K'ung, had moved to the small state of Lu, located in the modern province of Shantung in northeastern China. There is an early tradition that Confucius' father at an advanced age divorced his first wife because she had borne him only daughters and one disfigured son and married a 15-year-old girl from the Yen clan, who gave birth to K'ung Ch'iu. Ssu-ma Ch'ien refers to the relationship as a "wild union," which very possibly indicates that Confucius was an illegitimate child.

Confucius' birth date is given in early sources as either 551 or 552, although the former is more commonly accepted. The exact status of his family at the time of his birth is obscured by later attempts to create for him an illustrious lineage. In the *Analects*, Confucius says that during his youth he was in humble circumstances and forced to acquire many different skills. It is clear that even though the fortunes of his family had declined, he was no commoner. Confucius unquestionably belonged to the aristocratic class known as the *shih*. By the time of Confucius most *shih* served as court officials, scholars, and teachers, and Confucius' first occupation appears to have been as keeper of the Lu granary and later as supervisor of the fields, both low positions but consistent with his *shih* status.

Career as a Teacher

We do not know exactly when Confucius embarked on his teaching career, but it does not appear to have been much before the age of 30. In 518 he may have served as tutor to one of the prominent clans of Lu, the Meng, who wished their sons to be educated in the *li*, or ritual. He is alleged to have journeyed to Loyang that year to instruct himself in the traditional Chou ritual. Here he is said to have met the famous Taoist teacher Lao Tzu, who reportedly bluntly rebuked Confucius for his stuffiness and arrogance. This story is undoubtedly apocryphal and belongs to the corpus of anti-Confucian lore circulated by the Taoist school.

The nominal head of state in Lu at this time was a duke (*kung*), but the actual power lay in the hands of three clans: the Meng, Shu, and Chi. The most powerful of the three in Confucius' time was the Chi, which was frequently in conflict with the ducal house and the other clans. In 517 Duke Chao of Lu took prisoner the prime minister, Chi P'ing-tzu, and was immediately attacked by the other two clans. The duke fled to the neighboring state of Ch'i, Confucius apparently felt a certain loyalty to the duke and fled with him. There are a number of stories about Confucius' adventures in Ch'i, but most of them appear spurious.

Confucius eventually returned to Lu; one suggested date is 515. For several years after his return he does not appear to have accepted a governmental position and instead spent most of his time studying and teaching. He gathered around him a large number of students. Although we can only guess at the exact curriculum of the school, it undoubtedly included instruction in ritual, music, history, and poetry.

In 510 Duke Chao died without ever having returned to Lu, and the Chi clan set up another member of the ducal house as Duke Ting. Shortly thereafter, in 505, a swashbuckling adventurer named Yang Hu, who had been a supporter of the Chi family, rebelled and seized power in Lu.

The clans were able to gather enough strength to expel Yang Hu from Lu in 501, but at the same time

another military commander, Kung-shan Fu-jao, gained control of the fortified city of Pi, which was the fief of the Chi clan. Kung-shan Fu-jao issued an invitation to Confucius to join his government. The *Analects* records that Confucius was tempted to accept the offer, and only after being rebuked by his disciple Tzu-lu, who was in the employ of the Chi clan, did the master reluctantly decline. The decision to violate his own principles and serve a man in open revolt against the constituted authority of his state is a good indication of Confucius' intense desire to obtain a position, no matter how compromising, from which to implement his ideas.

Political Career

Confucius finally did obtain the post he wanted in 501, this time with the legitimate government of Lu. He first served as magistrate of the city of Chang-tu and later was promoted to the important position of minister of justice (*ssu-k'ou*). There are a number of stories about Confucius' actions in this office, most of which cannot be verified. One of these stories concerns Confucius' role at the Chia-ku convention in the state of Ch'i, a meeting between the dukes of Ch'i and Lu in 500. At least five sources record that Confucius was responsible for thwarting a plot by Ch'i to kidnap the Duke of Lu and was able to force Ch'i to restore territory it had seized from Lu. Scholars have questioned the historicity of Confucius' participation in this event, but the wide currency of the account must indicate some grain of truth.

Confucius probably owed his position in Lu to the influence of the Chi family, which was still the dominant power. We know from the *Analects* that he was on especially good terms with Chi K'ang-tzu, the son of the head of the Chi clan. Several of Confucius' disciples were employed by the Chi family. Because of his close association with the Chi clan, which in effect was a usurper of the ducal power, it might be supposed that Confucius had compromised his integrity. However, Confucius and his disciples actually seem to have worked to reduce the power of the three clans. For example, in 498 they were able to extract promises from the Chi, Meng, and Shu families to demolish their fortified cities, which were their bases of power. The Chi and Shu actually had begun preparations to dismantle their cities when the Meng reneged and the plan was abandoned. Nevertheless, the episode is a clear example of Confucius' interest in restoring legitimacy in Lu.

His Travels

It must have been shortly after the failure of his plan to dismantle the fortified cities that Confucius decided to leave his home in Lu and embark on a long journey throughout eastern China. The traditional explanation for Confucius' decision to leave is that Ch'i believed that if Confucius continued to advise the Duke of Lu, Lu would become more powerful and eventually dominate the other states around it. Therefore, in order to distract the duke from his political duties, Ch'i sent him 80 beautiful dancers and 30 teams of horses. The duke accepted them and became so engrossed that he did not hold court for 3 days, which so incensed Confucius that he resigned his post. This story clearly is a fabrication designed to disguise a less noble motive for Confucius' departure, namely, pressure from the clans, who must have been alarmed by Confucius' attempt to reduce their power.

Confucius left Lu accompanied by several of his disciples, including the former soldier Chung Yu (Tzu-lu) and Yen Hui, his favorite. They wandered throughout the eastern states of Wei, Sung, and Ch'en and at various times had their lives threatened. Confucius was almost assassinated in Sung by one Huan T'ui. On another occasion he was mistaken for the adventurer Yang Hu and was arrested and

held in confinement until his true identity became known.

Confucius was received with great respect by the rulers of the states he visited, and he even seems to have received occasional emoluments. He spent much of his time developing and expounding his ideas on the art of government, as well as continuing his teaching. He acquired a large following, and the solidification of the Confucian school probably occurred during these years of exile. Not all of his disciples followed him on his travels, and several of them actually returned to Lu and assumed positions with the Chi clan. It may have been through their influence that in 484 Confucius was invited back to Lu.

Final Years

Confucius was warmly received in Lu, but there is no indication that he was given a responsible position. Little is known about his last years, although this would have been a logical time for him to work on the many texts and documents he is reputed to have acquired on his journey. Much of his time was devoted to teaching, and he seems to have remained more or less aloof from political affairs.

This was an unhappy period for Confucius. His only son died about this time; his favorite disciple, Yen Hui, died the very year of his return to Lu; and in 480 Tzu-lu was killed in battle. All these losses Confucius felt deeply, and his despair and frustration must have been intensified by the realization that his political ideas had found no sympathetic ear among the rulers of his own state. Confucius died in 479. His disciples conducted his funeral and observed a mourning period for him.

Confucius' Writings

Confucius has been considered responsible for editing and writing some of the most important works in the Chinese tradition. According to relatively early sources, he arranged the classical anthology of early Chinese poetry, the *Book of Odes* (*Shih ching*), into its present order and discarded spurious material from a historical work known as the *Book of Documents* (*Shu ching*). He is also credited with writing parts of the great divination classic, the *Book of Changes* (*I ching*), and the book of ritual, the *Records of Rites* (*Li chi*). His name is also associated with a work on music, the *Book of Music* (*Yüeh ching*), which is now lost. Few modern scholars accept any of these traditional attributions, and Confucius' connection with these books is simply another aspect of the traditional Confucian myth.

One work that cannot be dismissed so easily, however, is the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Ch'un ch'iu*), which is a chronological record of the reigns of the 12 dukes of Lu, beginning with the year 722 and ending in 479 B.C. As early as the philosopher Mencius (ca. 317-289 B.C.), Confucius has been credited with compiling or editing this work, which was claimed to contain hidden criticisms of many of the Lu rulers. Later Confucian scholars tried to discover these hidden criticisms, but most scholars now agree that the *Spring and Autumn Annals* is simply a dry chronicle, containing no hidden meanings, and in spite of Mencius's testimony, Confucius had nothing to do with it.

Confucius' Teachings

Although we cannot be certain that Confucius wrote any of the works attributed to him, it is still possible to know something about the general nature of his philosophy. Shortly after his death his disciples compiled a work known as the *Lun yü*, commonly translated as the *Analects* but more accurately rendered as the *Edited Conversations*. This work consists of conversations between

Confucius, his students, and an occasional ruler.

The primary emphasis of the *Lun yǔ* is on political philosophy. Confucius was concerned about the rampant immorality and amorality of much of the government of his time, and he spent much of his life trying to find a ruler who would accept his teaching that ethical considerations should be the guiding principle of government. Confucius taught that the primary task of the ruler was to achieve the welfare and happiness of the people of his state. To accomplish this aim, the ruler had first to set a moral example by his own conduct, and this example would in turn influence the people's behavior. Confucius rejected the use of a rigid legal system and believed instead that moral custom and voluntary compliance were the best ways of maintaining order in society.

Confucius considered the early years of the Chou dynasty as the embodiment of the perfect form of government. It was not the rulers of this period that he admired so much as the chief minister, Chou Tan, or the Duke of Chou. The Duke of Chou was known in early Chinese tradition as the founder of the state of Lu, and he was probably the chief culture hero in this state. Because Confucius came from Lu, some scholars have claimed that much of Confucius' teachings were simply a revival of this cult. It is certainly true that Confucius himself never claimed to be teaching original ideas but rather termed himself a "transmitter."

Nevertheless, Confucius is the first Chinese thinker to introduce concepts that became fundamental not only to Confucian philosophy but to Chinese philosophy in general. The most important of these are *jen* (benevolence), *yi* (propriety), and *li* (ritual). Confucius believed that the *chün-tzu*, or "gentleman," must set the moral example for others in society to follow. The word *chün-tzu* originally meant "ruler's son," but in the *Lun yǔ* it refers to the educated "man of virtue," who was not necessarily an aristocrat. The *chün-tzu* was expected to follow a set of ethical principles, of which *jen*, *yi*, and *li* were the most important. *Jen* meant in the *Lun yǔ* what has been translated as humaneness or benevolence, a quality a *chün-tzu* should cultivate and, once acquired, attempt to transfer to others. *Li* was considered the rules of decorum and ritual that were observed in religious and non-religious ceremonies and, as applied to the *chün-tzu*, composed his rules of behavior. According to the *Lun yǔ*, it was through a knowledge of the *li* that *yi*, or propriety, could be attained. *Yi* represents what is right and proper in a given situation, and the *chün-tzu*, by observing the ritual and because of his inclination toward goodness, always knows what is right.

Confucius was basically a humanist and one of the greatest teachers in Chinese history. His influence on his immediate disciples was profound, and they continued to expound his theories until, in the first Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 8), they became the basis of the state ideology.

Further Readings

- The *Lun yǔ* has been translated many times. There are two acceptable translations: James Legge, *Confucian Analects* (1861), and Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (1938).
- Because of the nature of the sources, there is no definitive account of Confucius' life. Herrlee Glessner Creel, *Confucius the Man and the Myth* (1949; republished as *Confucius and the Chinese Way*, 1960), is an attempt to discard the Confucian myth and write a biography based on historical material. Creel concludes that Confucius was basically a democrat and revolutionary. At the other extreme is Wu-chi Liu, *Confucius: His Life and Times* (1955), which accepts almost all of the legends rejected by Creel. It is a good example of the traditional Chinese approach to Confucius. A

good balance between these two works is Shigeki Kaizuka, *Confucius*, translated from the Japanese by Geoffrey Bownas (1956). Kaizuka critically examines the apocryphal stories but does not dismiss them as readily as Creel.

- The significance of Confucius for Chinese thought and society can be studied in any history of Chinese civilization. The best of these are C. P. Fitzgerald, *China: A Short Cultural History* (1938) and *The Horizon History of China* (1969); William Theodore de Bary and others, eds., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1960); and Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (1963).

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